

Greetings!

My name is Jane Dobija. I'm pleased to join the Friends, the staff, and the patrons of the Encino-Tarzana Library as your new Senior Librarian.

I've been a Senior, Adult, and Teen Librarian at six other Los Angeles Public Library branches, and in a department at Central Library. But never in my twenty-year career have I faced the challenge of learning about and connecting to my community in such a difficult environment, in the absence of direct human contact.

We've been operating on a restricted basis for six months now, and the strain is showing vividly. We're all tired of being forced to stay at home, of being unable to travel to see our family or even to hug the grandchild who lives down the street. I, for one, have grown bored with the same almond tree outside my back window, and although I love my dogs (Their names are Danny and Aretha Franklin. More later), I find their conversational skills so limited as to be irritating.

And then, there's the library.

I've been to our branch once since coming on board about a month ago. It feels empty and hollow, just like my last library, the Memorial Branch, without any patrons inside. I know that, as an institution, we are doing the best we can to serve our public by operating curbside service at Hubs throughout the system. And I appreciate the fact that the leaders within our system take my safety and yours seriously. Some of you may be part of a vulnerable population. I am, too. That is why I am willing to wait, albeit impatiently, until science tells us we can safely begin to return to a new normal.

In a way, this is Our War. And we're going to have to get through it together.

When we closed our doors, many of my staff at my last branch thought virtual contact or programming was impossible. Some of them were on the disadvantaged side of the digital divide because they were afraid of the technology, or unfamiliar with it, or accustomed to having a friend or family member do all that computer stuff for them. But most of them, with some encouragement from me, took the leap and gave the digital world a try. When I left, one of them, a messenger clerk about my age, was creating and sharing slideshows with music in the background that captured the story of our branch in quarantine. Another, also a messenger clerk, had become a regular contributor to our digital resources on Instagram. And a third, this time a Teen Librarian, created a project with quick, graphic novel recommendations that has been picked up by Central Library and is soon to become a system-wide program with participation from librarians all over the city.

I know how hard it is to be hopeful in this environment. But others have faced the gloom of COVID-19 and overcome it, and I am counting on my Encino-Tarzana staff and Friends to try to do the same.

I derive inspiration from the mission I assigned myself twenty years ago. Wherever I work as a librarian, and especially as a senior librarian, I strive to create for my community a safe space, be it real or virtual, where opinions and ideas can be shared in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. That same space should be suitable for having fun, too, for celebrating, and for supporting one another in times of stress.

I also derive hope from the career I pursued prior to coming to LA. That involved a 15-year stint in Poland, where I worked with the Underground during the last years the country was under Soviet control; reported for NPR and others on the revolution that won them independence; ran my own newspaper that told the story of an emerging Eastern Europe from the inside; and finally created and ran the first independent school of journalism in Poland since World War Two.

I know I have been long-winded. You will find that, usually, I'm not so verbose. But I want to take full advantage of this opportunity to let you know who I am, to assure you that I will do the best job possible for all of us during this difficult time, and to encourage you to trust that we are all up to this task.

As for your task, I have just one: Think one positive thought daily. Hold onto it. And if it makes any sense, consider how that positive thought might be applied to our library.

Let me know what you come up with.

With warm regards,  
Jane  
jdobija@lapl.org